

# Past AP English Language and Composition Essay Topics

In the following chart, you will find a paraphrasing of AP English Language and Composition essay topics since 1980. Although an exact topic is never reused, when you read this information you should look for trends and patterns in the essay topics. Examine the different modes the essay category requires. For instance, understand the difference between writing a rhetorical analysis essay and writing an argument essay. Notice that in the argument topics, you may use examples from your observation, experience, or reading to support your ideas. Finally, be aware that the real test will not be printed like this; it will not tell you that the topic is a “rhetorical analysis” one or an “argument” one, for example. However, you should be able to understand what category the topic fits into from your practice.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Question Category</b>	<b>Passage/Topic (Title of Passage and Author)</b>
1980	Argument	Discuss the grounds on which a group could attack or suppress a work (such as a book, movie, and so on), and then defend the work.
	Rhetorical analysis	Two eyewitness accounts of two different funerals are given—one from Henry James, the other from Ralph Ellison. Analyze the differences in their perspectives as seen in their rhetoric.
	Argument	“Querencia” is defined as a “feeling for one’s own place”; identify your “own place” and explain its meaning.
1981	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from “The Rattler” by Donald Peattie is given in which he describes coming upon a rattlesnake in the desert. Discuss the passage’s effect and how it is created by the author’s techniques.
	Rhetorical analysis	A portion of the letter written by George Bernard Shaw after the death of his mother is presented. Describe the author’s attitude toward his mother and her cremation; analyze how his language conveys his attitude.
	Argument	A short passage from Thomas Szasz is given that discusses the struggle for definition. Agree or disagree with the author’s position and draw upon your experiences, observations, or readings to support your position.
1982	Argument	A passage is given in which the author disagrees with the adage, “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise.” Summarize the passage’s reasoning and agree or disagree with the author’s opinion.
	Rhetorical analysis	The given passage is a statement of veto from Governor Adlai E. Stevenson to the state congress. Analyze the governor’s strategies and devices that make his argument effective.
	Free response	Describe a place so that it conveys a recognizable feeling through specific details without having to state that feeling.
1983	Argument	Analyze both the good and bad effects of a change in society that has occurred or that you would like to see occur.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Thomas Carlyle’s <i>Past and Present</i> is given. Define the author’s attitude toward work, what assumptions he makes about human nature, and how his language persuades the reader of the validity of his position.
	Argument	Agree or disagree with the concept that “when everything is superlative, everything is mediocre” while considering the “ethical and social consequences of language inflation.”

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1984	Argument	Examine the importance of time, how you keep track of time, and what this reveals about you.
	Argument	Two passages are given that have different definitions of freedom. One is by Percy Bysshe Shelley and the other is by John Milton. Discuss the concept expressed in each passage and examine the concepts' differences.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Norman Mailer that describes Paret, a Cuban boxer, is given. Analyze the effect of the passage on the reader and how Mailer's rhetoric produces that effect.
1985	Rhetorical analysis	Two passages describe the Soviet Union's launching of the first satellite in 1957. Analyze the stylistic and rhetorical differences between the passages.
	Rhetorical analysis	Two drafts from the same writer reflect his thoughts about how war changed his attitude about language. Discuss reasons for the writer's additions and deletions and how the revisions affect the passage.
	Argument	The passage implies that television should reflect the real world. Defend one or more of the propositions in the passage.
1986	Rhetorical analysis	Two Native American writers, N. S. Momaday and D. Brown, describe similar landscapes. Analyze how their respective rhetoric reveal their different purposes.
	Rhetorical analysis	Pairs of words similar in meaning but different in connotation are given (for example, "religion" and "cult"). Choose one or more pairs and elaborate on their distinctions.
	Argument	A quote claiming that human nature yearns for patterns, structure, and conformity is given. Agree or disagree with the concept and use your experiences, observations, or readings to back up your opinion.
1987	Argument	Agree or disagree with E. M. Forster's quotation in which he claims the he would rather betray his country than betray a friend.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Zora Neal Hurston's <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> is given; analyze how her diction and point of view enhance our view of her childhood.
	Argument	Examine how the language of a specific group you know well, such as an ethnic or social group, reflects that group. Describe the language (sociolect) of that group and discuss its influences.
1988	Argument	A passage from de Tocqueville's <i>Democracy in America</i> is given in which he concludes that democracy "throws [man] back forever upon himself alone." Evaluate his ideas.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Frederick Douglass explains how he felt after escaping slavery and arriving in New York in 1838. Analyze how his diverse language presents his various states of mind.
	Free response	Describe a place that might be of interest or significance to others. Include descriptive detail and your attitude regarding this location.
1989	Argument	An announcement from a church bulletin reprinted in a magazine is given; the heading in the magazine implies a criticism of American values. Argue for or against the implied criticism.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Martin Luther King's <i>Why We Can't Wait</i> is given; analyze how his rhetoric fits his rhetorical purpose.

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	Argument	Describe how one person can be perceived differently at different times or in different situations.
1990	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Beryl Markham's autobiography is given. Analyze how her rhetoric reflects her personality.
	Rhetorical analysis	Two passages describe the Galapagos Islands. Analyze the stylistic and rhetorical differences between them.
	Argument	Present an argument for or against the Supreme Court ruling that limited the First Amendment rights of student newspapers, claiming that a school newspaper is a "laboratory situation" that can be curbed to remain consistent with the school's "basic educational mission."
1991	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from the composer Igor Stravinsky is given; analyze how his diction and rhetorical devices present his point of view.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Richard Rodriguez's autobiography is given; analyze how his rhetoric and style reflect his attitude toward his family and himself.
	Argument	A biblical quote from Ecclesiastes claims that more knowledge brings more sorrow. Agree or disagree and use your experiences, observations, or readings to support your position.
1992	Rhetorical analysis	A speech from Queen Elizabeth I to her troops during the war with the Spanish Armada is given. Identify her purpose and analyze how she uses language to achieve that purpose.
	Argument	A passage from a Joseph Addison essay in <i>The Spectator</i> claims that mankind uses ridicule for bad aims instead of using it to achieve good. Defend, challenge, or qualify the concept, using your experiences, readings, or observations to back up your ideas.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Nancy Mairs about being a "cripple" is given; analyze how she presents herself through language and rhetorical features.
1993	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Jane Austen and a passage from Charles Dickens are given, each dealing with the subject of marriage. Compare the rhetorical strategies in the passages and the possible effects of each proposal.
	Argument	A passage from H. L. Mencken clarifies his view about the relationship between an artist and society. Defend, qualify, or challenge Mencken's view and support your position with references to particular writers, artists, or composers.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from E. M. Forster's essay "My Wood" describes his feeling about owning property that he bought from his book royalties. Analyze how his rhetoric and biblical allusions convey his attitude.
1994	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Sir George Savile, a member of King Charles II's Privy Council, is given in which he addresses the criticism that the king loves only pleasure. Clarify what attitude Savile wants the reader to adopt and how his rhetorical strategies encourage that attitude.
	Argument	A quotation from Barbara Tuchman's <i>March of Folly</i> is given in which she asserts the role that "wooden-headedness" plays in human affairs. Defend, challenge, or qualify her idea, using your readings and/or observations to support your position.

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	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Joan Didion's essay "Los Angeles Notebook" is given in which she describes the Santa Ana winds and their effect on people. Analyze how her rhetoric promotes her views.
1995	Argument	A passage is used in which John Ruskin claims that precedence should be given to the soldier over the merchant or manufacturer. Evaluate Ruskin's argument.
	Rhetorical analysis	A column by Ellen Goodman called "The Company Man" is given. Analyze how her language and rhetorical technique convey her attitude.
	Argument	A passage from James Baldwin about the importance of language as the "key to identity" and social acceptance is given. Defend, challenge, or qualify Baldwin's ideas, using your experiences, observations, or readings to develop your opinion.
1996	Rhetorical analysis	A letter from Lady Montagu to her daughter is given, regarding the education of her granddaughter. Analyze the rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices she uses to present her ideas about the role that education played in women's lives in the 18th century.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Gary Soto's autobiography is presented in which he recounts an experience of stealing a pie at age 6. Examine how his rhetoric re-creates both the experience and his ensuing guilt.
	Argument	A passage from Lewis Lapham's <i>Money and Class in America</i> is given in which he observes the attitudes of Americans toward wealth. Defend, challenge, or qualify his view, based on your own experience and knowledge.
1997	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Meena Alexander's autobiography, <i>Fault Lines</i> , is given. Analyze how her language represents her "fractured identity."
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from the autobiography, <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave</i> , is presented. Analyze how the third paragraph differs stylistically from the rest of the passage and reinforces Douglass's purpose.
	Argument	A passage from Neil Postman, a contemporary social critic, contrasts the view of the future as presented in Orwell's <i>1984</i> and Huxley's <i>Brave New World</i> . Postman finds Huxley's ideas more relevant. Agree or disagree with Postman's idea, based on your understanding of modern society.
1998	Rhetorical analysis	A letter from Charles Lamb to English Romantic poet William Wordsworth is given. Analyze the techniques Lamb uses to reject an invitation by Wordsworth to visit.
	Argument	A passage from Henry James's novel <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> is given in which two conversationalists present differing views about what constitutes the self. Using your experiences, observations, or readings, develop whichever position you feel has greater validity.
	Rhetorical analysis	Two letters are presented that deal with an advertising company's use of the slogan "It's the Real Thing" to promote a book. One letter is from a Coca-Cola Company executive and the second is a reply from the advertiser. Analyze the rhetorical strategies each writer uses and examine which is more successful in its persuasion.
1999	Rhetorical analysis	Two passages describing Florida's Okefenokee Swamp are presented. Analyze how the rhetoric of each passage reflects each author's purpose.
	Rhetorical analysis	A passage from Jamaica Kinkaid's essay "On Seeing England for the First Time" is given. Analyze how her attitude toward England is presented through her rhetoric.